

## **Representation “Do’s and Don’ts”: Hanna Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation***

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1967 was a “watershed year” in the United States for studies of political representation (Eulau and Karps 238). It was a period of uncommon political activism when political representation was actively contested in United States politics by the legal and political struggles of the Black Civil Rights movement over redistricting and voting rights. It was also an uncommon year in the field of Political Science. In 1967, a political theory Ph.D. saw her dissertation published as a University of California Press book. That book, *The Concept of Representation*, helped shape two generations of empirical research into the practice of American democracy.

This was uncommon because by 1967 behavioral approaches to the study of politics had reached a heyday in the United States. It was unusual for works of normative political theory to be read by empirical scientists, let alone taken up by them. That Pitkin’s text should have become a touchstone for thirty years of research was especially unusual for hers was no user-friendly guide to political representation. It was a work of critical theory, intricately argued, that set itself against the orthodox conception of political representation as a mechanism for democratic government whereby legislators who are competitively elected act on policy demands originated by their constituencies.

This is a subject-centered view of political representation, which defines it as an interpersonal and communicative relationship between a principal and an agent. Hanna Pitkin made the radical move of de-centering political representation from the intentions and acts of individual subjects and, so, breaking with the assumption that a political representative, like a lawyer, delegate or trustee, stands in a “one-to-one, person-to-person relationship” to a principal (1967, 221). Pitkin defined political representation as a “public, institutionalized arrangement” where representation emerges not from “any single action by any one participant, but [from] the over-all structure and functioning of the system” (221-22). That system exists “not merely [to] promote the public interest” but to be “responsive to popular wishes when there are some” (233). This redefinition was justly celebrated as radical by Eulau and Karps for casting political representation as “a social relationship rather than an attribute of the individual person,” and by Jewell for defining “representation as activity” (Eulau and Karps 1977, 237; Jewell 1983, 304). Yet despite its radical de-centering of political representation, and despite the fact that it was widely cited, Pitkin’s text did not radically reshape the orthodox concept of representation. Why?

Pitkin coupled her radical conceptual openings to some strikingly and disappointingly conventional formulations. This was particularly true of her choice to couch her own conception of

political representation in the too-familiar term “responsiveness” (233). Eulau and Karps, two of Pitkin’s most incisive and appreciative readers, were particularly disappointed by this because Pitkin seemed to make no effort to reconcile this term with the larger argument that so captivated them, because she provided no “clues” as to how to think about “‘responsiveness’ as a *systemic* property of the political collectivity” (1977, 237; emphasis added). Absent such clues, Pitkin’s argument would have the paradoxical effect of encouraging empirical and normative researchers to persist in thinking about political representation in the very terms that Pitkin set out to revise: as a one-on-one relationship between a representative and a constituency.

This is exactly what happened. Despite citing Pitkin, much of the empirical research on the United States Congress in the 1970s conceives of representation in precisely the terms that she rejects: as a relationship between legislators and their constituencies that is more or less representative depending on the responsiveness of the legislator to constituent preferences.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, some readers took up Pitkin’s work as a convenient shortcut through notoriously dense conceptual thickets. But the persistence of these orthodox understandings of political representation cannot be simply put down to the fact that most who cited her didn’t give her text the attention that a serious work of political theory deserves, and so stripped the points that supported their research out of the context of the radical de-centering of political representation that would have given them pause. There is an orthodoxy at the heart of Pitkin’s own text because she anchored her conception of political representation to what she termed the “etymological” meaning of the concept: “*re-presentation*, a making present again” (1967, 10). Pitkin’s commitment to this “etymological” meaning re-introduces into her work a foundationalist metaphysics that works against her own insistence on theorizing representation as a distinctively political activity that can be neither understood nor justified by analogy to guardianship and expertise.

This essay is a close reading of Pitkin’s text that aims to emphasize its radical openings and to trace how she forecloses them. Unlike many of Pitkin’s readers, who jump into her text at its last chapter (where she finally turns to consider political representation) I follow the structure of Pitkin’s argument. I begin with her survey of the main views of the concept of representation. I present her concept of representation as “substantive acting for.” Only then do I reach her conception of political representation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Malcom E. Jewell observes this same discrepancy, noting that “despite Pitkin’s (1967, p. 221) assertion that representation is ‘primarily a public, institutionalized arrangement,’ nearly all research on representation has focused on the relationships between the individual legislator and the constituency” (1983, 306). For example, scholars who cited Pitkin as their source persisted in defining political representation as a “normative property of a relationship between a legislator’s opinions and those of his constituency as a whole” (Achen 1978, 477); reduced her complex argument to a single word “responsiveness” (Stimson); or summed it up in a catchphrase “acting in the best interest of the public” (Manin et al. 1999, 2).

<sup>2</sup> To develop: Why I’m re-reading Pitkin. Not just to correct these readings. But because recent empirical findings support aspects of Pitkin’s radical notion of representation—i.e. they suggest that the system is representing in some respects if you define it systemically. Yet there is also lots of anxiety about the central finding (shaped from above). This does pose a problem in the terms that they have

## Representation: The Main Views of the Concept

Pitkin proposes an unorthodox understanding of representation in setting two conditions that a proper concept of representation must fulfill. First, it must conceive of representation as an *activity* rather than as a relationship between two terms. When an agent represents a principal, the agent makes decisions and commitments that the principal is bound honor, and acts in ways that the principal must own. It follows that a concept of representation must make it possible to pass judgment on the *content* of those decisions, commitments and acts. Thus the second requirement is that a concept of representation be substantive. If the consequences of the decisions and commitments that a representative makes are to be binding on a constituency, it is not enough to say that the representative had the *right* to act for that constituency regardless of *what* he or she did and notwithstanding the *manner* in which he or she conducted himself or herself. The constituency must recognize itself in what the representative has done and in the way he or she went about doing it.

Pitkin surveys the main views of representation with these two conditions in mind. With each of the orthodoxies she challenges, Pitkin broaches a critique of referentiality that would have made hers a stunningly radical intervention into the representation debates. At each stage, this argument points beyond itself. But at crucial points, she reins it in.

### Representation as “Formal Acting For” and “Standing For”

These two conditions rule out the very common “authorization” and “accountability” theories which conceive of representation as a formal contractual relationship (ch 3). According to these theories, representation can be legitimately said to occur when one or both of two procedural conditions are met. Either the agent has been *authorized* in advance to obligate the principal, or he or she will be *held accountable* after the fact to defend what he or she has done in the principal’s name (58). Pitkin contends that such formalistic conceptions are unsatisfying because they are indifferent to “what goes on *during* representation” and, so, permit us to say only *that* someone represents affording us no criteria by which to judge how well (58). Pitkin argues that if we want to ask not only whether an agent represents but whether he or she does so well or badly we need a conception of representation that ascribes “substantive content” to that activity (59).

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inherited from Pitkin. But in this respect I think Pitkin’s legacy to them is a false debate. *One way I could put it is that the central finding of recent empirical work—that public opinion is not independent of the institutions that claim to represent it—poses a problem for the conception of representation they take themselves to have inherited from Pitkin. [Elaborate, especially using Stimson]. I don’t know if I want to go on in this vein, but I could say that this isn’t really such a shocking finding; Schattschneider said it long ago. Nor is it necessarily devastating to democracy (at least not to democracy as Schattschneider so distinctively defined it). It IS devastating however in a contemporary context where the connection between representation and democracy is assumed and where deliberative democracy dominates the models of democracy.*

This substantive content might be provided either by “what a representative does,” following the German “acting for” (*vertreten*), or by “what a representative is,” following the German “standing for” (*darstellen*), which has two variants: symbolic and descriptive (59). It is noteworthy that while Pitkin insists that there be some substantive component to representation, she explicitly refuses a referential conception of that substance by arguing that descriptive representation cannot supply that component. In descriptive representation, “a person or thing stands for others” by typifying, mirroring or substituting for the salient characteristics of their constituencies (80). Pitkin rejects this as a “static” and literal understanding of representation that is dangerously misleading because it promises a “perfect accuracy of correspondence [that] is impossible” (1967, 80, 87). She maintains that there is an irreducibly active element to representation which involves selecting “which characteristics are politically relevant for reproduction” (1967, 87). This means that there is a necessarily constitutive, creative aspect of representation: it is not a simple reproduction of but a departure from whatever came before (1967, 87). This irreducibly active element requires that there be “a certain distance or difference as well as resemblance or correspondence” that descriptive representation as standing for cannot accommodate (1967, 68). As a consequence, it leaves no latitude for “leadership, initiative, or creative action” on the part of the representative, and forecloses any possibility of evaluation by the constituency: “A man can only be held to account for what he has done, not for what he is; so at most a descriptive representative might be held to account for whether he has given accurate information about the constituents” (1967, 90). By this critique of descriptive standing for, Pitkin effects a decisive break with “mirror” theories of representation, which is one significant step away from referentiality.

In treating symbolic representation, the other variant of standing for, she qualifies this move. Pitkin’s relationship to symbolic representation is complex because it is the first of the orthodox concepts of representation to satisfy one of her conditions: that representation be conceived as an activity rather than a relationship. Symbolic representation effects an “identification” and “alignment of wills between ruler and ruled” (106, 108). It stands or falls not on the goals that a leader achieves but on a “state of mind,” the constituents’ “condition of satisfaction or belief” (106). In symbolic representation, then, the representative addresses him or herself not to policy goals but to working “on the minds of the people who are to accept” his or her leadership (101). Pitkin emphasizes that this “*is* a kind of activity”: the representative is active “as a symbol-maker, making himself into an accepted leader” (113, 107; italics original). But she is quick to say that this is “not what we would ordinarily call the activity of representing, and it is certainly not ‘acting for’ one’s constituents” because there is no “rational justification” for it (107). Symbolic representation “calls forth...the same irrational and affective elements produced by flags and hymns and marching bands”; it “need have little or nothing to do with accurate reflection of the popular will” (106). Carried to its extreme, symbolic representation “becomes the fascist theory of representation” which Pitkin, quoting Ernest Barker, characterizes as “‘inverse representation’” because “the people ‘reflect’ the leader” rather than influencing him (109). This cannot be representation, properly understood, because it posits a

unilateral “power relation” between a leader and a “people [who] are amorphous and incapable of action or will” (108). This reverses the protocol for representation that Pitkin takes to be implicit in the word itself: “as the ‘re’ in ‘representation’ seems to suggest, and as I have argued in rejecting the fascist theory of representation, the represented must be somehow logically prior; the representative must be responsive to him rather than the other way around” (140).

Pitkin’s treatment of these two variants of representation as “standing for” discloses an ambivalence that runs through *The Concept of Representation*. Whereas Pitkin does not want to bind representation to an epistemological criteria, the “*perfect* accuracy of correspondence” that she denounces as “impossible” in critiquing descriptive representation, neither can she live with the implications of an entirely non-referential notion of representation, one to which the epistemological standard of “accuracy” would be altogether irrelevant. Thus, she brings back the language of mirroring by criticizing symbolic “standing for” for having too “little...to do” with an “*accurate reflection* of the popular will.” This argumentation produces in the reader a kind of “Goldilocks” effect where, instead of hot and cold bowls of porridge, we are presented with theories of representation that are have by turns too much and too little accuracy. Such argumentation begs the more fundamental question whether “accuracy” can be part of a theory of representation like Pitkin’s that is supposed to “center on the activity of representing” (112). Is such an objective, which Pitkin asserts through out the book, compatible with the referential logic to which Pitkin adheres with equal fervor, maintaining that it follows necessarily from the etymology of the word?

#### Pitkin’s View: Representation as “Substantive Acting For”

These ambivalences intensify as Pitkin moves from refuting the orthodox conceptions—the “formal” authorization or accountability theories on the one hand and the “substantive” descriptive or symbolic likeness on the other—to work out the conception of representation that she endorses: representation as “an acting for others, an activity in behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else” in which—and this is crucial—the “substitute’s actions are, in some way or for some reason, to be ascribed to another” (113, 139). She will refer to this view with the shorthand, representation as a “substantive acting for others” (141). Whereas Pitkin is quick to emphasize that to focus a “view of representation...on the activity of representing” is not unique to her, she also insists that her approach to it is distinctive. Whereas “the greater part of the literature on political representation takes such an assumption for granted,” and moves directly either to prescribe norms for the “proper conduct” of representatives, or to determine “the proper way of institutionalizing representative government,” Pitkin insists on putting this unexamined presupposition to the test (112-13). She asks just “what goes on during representing” (144)? In other words, what is the *substance* of the activity of representation and how does this activity differ from others in which one person is understood to act in the place of another?

She tackles these questions by an exhaustive review of the various analogies to which theorists have had recourse in order to “illuminate the activity of representing” (119). She groups them into five categories: those such as “agent” or “actor” who act for another; those such as “guardian” or “trustee” who take care of another; those such as “deputy” or “attorney” who substitute for another; those such as “delegate” or “ambassador” who are emissaries for another; and the specialist who acts independently but in the interests of another (113-39). Pitkin makes two important observations. She notes, first, that each of these is a one-sided relationship; in each of them the agency of one of the parties takes precedence over that of the other. Second, she notes that these relationships are clear-cut because the terms and purpose of the relationship determine which party dominates. As such, none satisfies the twofold condition of representation as “substantive acting for”: an acting for another that is ascribed to that other. The actions of the deputy, for example, cannot be ascribed to the one who deputized him: he acts not “for him” but in his place “as [an] enforcer of the law” (132). In the case of the specialist or guardian, who might in fact be said to act for another in the sense of “looking after” them, the trouble is that “the one who is taken care of has nothing to say about it, is not conceived as being capable of saying anything about it or acting for himself” (140). In the case of the agent or delegate it is the reverse. Each is “a mere tool” of another: “he does not act for it; it acts through him, or by means of him” (141).

Pitkin draws an important conclusion from this review: the analogies that theorists most frequently use to characterize what actually goes on during representation are misleading. They betray two crucial aspects of the concept of representation that Pitkin underscores to distinguish it from the forms of acting for that are inconsistent with a democratic political project. These aspects—“equivalence” and the “paradoxical requirement”—bring us to the ambivalence at the core of Pitkin’s thought. For whereas “equivalence” politicizes representation and foregrounds Pitkin’s insistence on representation as activity, the “paradoxical requirement” draws her back into a patently metaphysical notion of representation as derivation from an original.

#### Pitkin’s Concept of Representation: Unique Aspects

##### *Equivalence*

The “equivalence” aspect of representation means that it, in contrast to these unilateral forms of acting for, is uniquely and distinctively reciprocal. It involves “a relative equivalence between the representative and the represented, so that the latter could conceivably have acted for himself instead” (140). Representing, then, is unlike being an agent, a guardian, a trustee, a delegate or a specialist in that it involves acting in the place of a principal whose own capacity for action must be taken into account and recognized in the process of representation.

Pitkin draws on the equivalence aspect of representation to dismantle the mandate-independence controversy. This controversy is, at on level, a stalemate involving competing claims to agency. Pitkin puts these words to it:

“It just isn’t really *representation*,” the mandate theorist will say, “if the man doesn’t do what his constituents want.” “It just isn’t really *representation*,” the independence theorist responds, “if the man isn’t free to decide on the basis of his own independent judgment” (150).

In effect, “both mandate and independence writers insist that the concept [of representation] itself supports their views” (150). And both are correct, as Pitkin explains. If representation is understood in terms of its aspect of equivalence, then it must allow for “a certain minimum of autonomy, of animation” on the part of the representative while at the same time ensuring that the representative does not carry this autonomy so far as to “persist in doing the opposite of what the constituency desires” (152). If these two elements are “both involved in the concept of representation,” then these putatively opposed positions—mandate and independence—both capture something true about that concept (165). They are bound to stalemate because there can be no end to a debate that pits them against one another as if they were competing *theories* of representation.

Yet if both of these capture something true, Pitkin observes that representation “begins to sound like an extraordinarily fragile and demanding human institution”: it is a rare institution in which a capacity for agency is genuinely reciprocal (155). This is another unorthodox claim that makes a refreshing break with two common lines of argument: direct democratic critiques of representation and its elite defense. Many thinkers (whether defenders of participatory democracy or not) cast political representation as a fall-back from models of politics that demand more of citizens. Representation is frequently understood to offer a pragmatic and achievable solution to the problems of scale, of complexity, and of the distractedness of the electorate that plague modern democracy. By emphasizing its equivalence aspect, Pitkin counters that representation is no simple fall-back but an extraordinary ideal that might not set an achievable political goal at all.

Most striking is the challenge she poses to the classical republican defense of political representation. Classical republican thinkers, whether they be the architects of good government reform in Progressive Era United States or the defenders of a restricted franchise in Britain, conceive representation as a form of guardianship and defend political representation as enabling government by specialists. Pitkin’s argument with this position is interesting because she chooses not to take on its elitism but its reduction of politics to epistemology. For classical republican thinkers, Edmund Burke is exemplary, political representation poses a set of epistemological problems: what are the conditions for discovering the “right answers to political problems”; how can these conditions be institutionalized politically; how to ensure a twofold correspondence between the public interest and the acts of representatives on the one hand, and the opinions of citizens on the other (170)?<sup>3</sup> Pitkin astutely traces this framing of the problem of representation to Burke’s “unstated assumptions about the nature of

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<sup>3</sup> Burke’s is a patently referential notion of representation but, as Pitkin underscores, it is unique in its genre. For Burke government does not represent persons—their individual or their general will—but interest. Put differently, the referent of representation is not the people but an “unattached” abstraction: the public interest (168).

interest” (180). For Burke government does not represent persons—their individual or their general will—but an “unattached” abstraction the public interest (168). She observes that Burke “sees interest very much as we today see scientific fact: it is completely independent of wishes or opinion, of whether we like it or not; it just is so” (180). It is also “broad, unified, and easily identifiable” not only by well-chosen members of Parliament but by “any reasonably intelligent and unprejudiced person” who takes the time to think about it (178, 180).

Pitkin takes the time to lay bare these assumptions in order to underscore the central role that consensus plays in Burke’s conception of representative government. Burke expects good representation (i.e. representation that is genuinely in the public interest) to produce consensus along two axes: along the vertical axis that runs downward from a representative to his constituency and along the horizontal axis that unites the members of that consistency. Persistent conflict indicates a pathology in the representative system. In the case of conflict between a representative and his constituency, it suggests that “the representative is corrupt or incompetent”; in the case of civil conflict, it suggests the existence of “serious, substantive grievances” to which the representative system is not giving expression (180, 178).

These notions that ground Burke’s referential notion of representation—the notion of a transcendent (Pitkin’s term, “unattached”) interest, of consensus as a sign of good representation, and conflict as an indicator of pathology—all serve to disclose how a referential logic depoliticizes the concept of representation. Although Pitkin does not criticize Burke in precisely these terms, it is significant that she chooses to counter his argument not by striking at its elitism but, rather, by refuting each term of its depoliticizing notion of interest. Against consensus, she insists that “political questions are inevitably controversial ones without a right answer” (189). Against abstract interest she affirms that “interests are the interests *of* someone who has a right to help define them” (189). And against the belief that the virtues of representatives can operate as a check on the excesses of power, she holds that “no reliable elite group exists in society” (189). Consequently, the “substance of the activity of representation” is not imposing answers on citizens but “promoting the interest of the represented, in a context where the latter is conceived as capable of action and judgment, but in such a way that he does not object to what is done in his name” (155). The test of representative institutions is not epistemological but political: do they provide the conditions for equivalence? As glossed here, equivalence requires that representatives enjoy the autonomy to “promote” the interest of the represented and the represented, in turn, have the capacity to mount objections to the acts that are done in their name.

The “equivalence” aspect of Pitkin’s concept of representation opens up a potentially radical line of argument against received wisdoms, particularly against that most stubborn commonplace that representation is above all a relation to a referent. Such a conception poses the problem of representation in epistemological terms: how to ensure an accurate correspondence between the two.



Pitkin suggests that to take representation seriously in its equivalence aspect is to pose a different question: How to institutionalize conditions for reciprocal agency?

### *Paradox*

The second unique aspect of her concept, the “paradoxical requirement,” closes off that path. It falls back on a patently metaphysical concept of representation as coming in some sense after the fact, hearkening back to or “reduplicating” something that exists autonomously of and prior to the act of representing it (Derrida 1972, 57). This dualist metaphysics exerts a pull toward epistemological questions that depoliticizes Pitkin’s own thinking, ultimately positioning her closer to Burke than she would want to be.

What is this “paradoxical requirement”? Like equivalence, it is an aspect of representation that is rendered imperceptible when theorists conceive of the representative by analogy to a guardian or specialist, each of whom is a substitute whose virtue, wisdom and expertise “totally eclipses and replaces the other” (133). The paradox begins to emerge, however, when it is recognized that representation is not a substitution but a “standing *for* rather than *in place of* another” (133; italics original). It means replacing someone without excluding them so that “the replaced person is somehow present in his replacement or in the latter’s action” (133, 144).<sup>4</sup> This ambiguous phrasing—“somehow present”—once again signals the contradiction that Pitkin takes to derive from the “basic meaning” of representation which is, “as the word’s etymological origins indicate, *re-representation*, a making present again” (8). The contradiction is that representing is being made “present again” without being brought back “as one might bring a book into the room” (8). Representation is “more” than a bringing or carrying, a simple transfer or conveyance of meaning from one point to another; it is a making that necessarily involves an element of creation and autonomy on the part of the representative (8).<sup>5</sup> Yet, the autonomy is not absolute. The actions of the representative must be able “in some way or for some reason, to be ascribed to another” (139). This is the contradictory requirement which, working with the vocabulary to which the “etymological origin” of representation has led her, Pitkin translates into the “paradox”: the represented “is simultaneously both present and not present” in the act of representation (9). Pitkin concludes that there is a “a fundamental dualism built into the meaning of representation” so that “representation means the making present of

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<sup>4</sup> She takes this fatal language of “presence” from Bernard J. Diggs whom she quotes as having written that “a representative...acts in place of another without excluding him; although he is not the principal, he ‘stands for’ the principal; the principal is ‘present through him’.” I need to read this source because I am curious to see whom Diggs is quoting (the presence of scare quotes suggests that someone is being quoted here), and because it is striking that this is one recent writer in the Pennock/Chapman volume whose authority Pitkin accepts. **Also note that she is endorsing a connection to “symbolic” representation as “standing for.”**

<sup>5</sup> This is why a representative is necessarily more than a “spokesperson” who conveys or carries the words of another (the incompatibility is even clearer in the French term “porte-parole,” which emphasizes that a spokesperson is not a representative but a speech or word carrier for another).

something which is nevertheless not literally present,” and “being represented means being made present in some sense, while not really being present literally or fully in fact” (144, 153).<sup>6</sup>

Much of the argument of the second half of Pitkin’s book will turn on this discovery. She will claim, for example, that this requirement to replace someone without excluding them, to represent them in such a way that they are “simultaneously both present and not present,” is the paradox that misled the parties to the mandate-independence controversy who have so fruitlessly pursued a “logically insoluble puzzle” in the belief that it posed a genuine political problem (9, 165). She argues that theorists’ failure to grasp this paradox prevents them from seeing that both of these putatively opposed views capture something true about representation.

Whereas Pitkin believes this paradox to be inherent in the meaning of representation, the reader who brings to Pitkin’s text even a passing familiarity with post-metaphysical philosophy will recognize the repetitions and variations on this theme—“present in some sense,” “nevertheless not present literally in fact,” “not literally present,” “being made present...while not...being present literally or fully in fact”—as symptomatic of the being-there-but-not-there that is the “signature” of presence.<sup>7</sup> Is the paradox inherent in representation? Or is it symptomatic of the contradictions that theorists and empirical researchers impose on themselves when they fall into the naïve—and notoriously elusive—concept of presence with its seductive insistence that the real be logically and temporally prior to its representation? Do these contradictions follow from representation itself, or from the foundationalism that envisions reality as a *condition* for the possibility of representation rather than an *effect* of acts of representation?

In *Speech and Phenomena*, a book that was published in France in 1967, the same year that Pitkin’s work was published in the United States, Jacques Derrida undertook to dismantle the temporality that underpins this foundationalism by refuting the intuition on which it rests: that something must be before it can be represented. Against this common sense, a primordial originality that conceives of representation as a derivation from an original, Derrida proposes a concept of “primordial” repetition (1972, 57). This amounts to a rival ontology which holds that reality is not given prior to its repetition; rather, it is from repetition that reality acquires the attribute of originality, the quality of seeming to be both logically and temporally prior to its repetition that Derrida terms

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<sup>6</sup> The striking characteristic of these phrasings is that each one of them implies an opposition that Pitkin cannot fully articulate. There is the reality that does not call for interpretation, one “literally present” or present “fully in fact,” and then representation which is being “somehow” present or present “in some sense”. Is a representation a “figurative” presence? A “fictional” presence? A presence “partially” in fact? What makes all of this so odd is that Pitkin dramatizes that thinking about representation in terms of “presence,” the term that is given by the “etymological origins” of the word, leads her into ambiguities and a kind of textual stammering. And yet she insists that to grasp its inherently paradoxical aspect, representation must be thought in these terms.

<sup>7</sup> In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida demonstrates how the performativity of the signature conveys the elusiveness of presence. Transposing this argument into the performativity of political foundations, Bonnie Honig writes: [quote from “Declarations of Independence”].

“presence.” On Derrida’s account, representation does not re-present. Rather it participates in creating the allegedly independent entities for which it claims only to stand, and, by “etymological” feint, reaffirms the dualistic ontology that lends credibility to the idea that they are independent. As Derrida puts it with characteristic elegance: “the presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and not the reverse” (1972, 52).

Derrida’s work suggests that those theorists of representation who permit themselves to be held hostage by the metaphysics of presence will find themselves in a “logically insoluble puzzle” more persistent than that which produced the mandate-independence stalemate. For however intuitive it may seem that a re-presentation must *follow* from something that has already been present, that presence will always prove impossible to substantiate *except by recourse to further representation*. As Derrida puts it: “the thing itself always escapes” (1972, 104). Thus, to define representation as Pitkin repeatedly does, as “the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present,” can only proliferate a series of fruitless quests (144). There is, first, the quest for the “something” that is the referent of representation, and, second, the frustrating—and ultimately depoliticizing—effort to determine at what point this referent will have been made present but not “literally or fully in fact.”

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#### **Does representation “as a substantive activity” apply to politics?**

This is the question that Pitkin treats in the final chapter of her book, a chapter that begins on a note of skepticism that “representation as a substantive activity may often have seemed *remote* from the realities of political life” (215; italics added). Many scholars who cite Pitkin cite this chapter alone, read it out of the context of the rest of her argument, and imagine that she simply proposes a conception of political representation. On the contrary, in this chapter Pitkin opened to scrutiny the most unthinking reflex of both empirical and normative theorists of representation: the habit of defining political representation by analogy to the various forms of private representation private by assuming that the political representative—like the legal advocate, the deputy, the guardian, or the specialist—stands in a “one-to-one, person-to-person” relationship to a principal (1967, 221). Pitkin’s unorthodox argument is that if scholars persist in that assumption, then representation “as a substantive activity” will be *irreconcilable* with the realities of political life.

Pitkin called it a “mistake” to assimilate political representation to any of these “one-to-one, person-to-person” relationships because, in them, an agent acts on the part of a principal (an individual, family or corporation) that exists as a unified body in advance of being represented (1967, 221). Private representation is fundamentally conservative. The objective is to protect the interests of the principal by acting either as a delegate, in the case where the principal judges its interests correctly and governs itself in accordance with them, or by acting as a trustee, in the case where a principal is incompetent, lacking in expertise, or self-destructive. Pitkin makes her most radical breaks with a referential understanding of representation in delineating the various aspects in which political

representation differs from this model. Yet, consistent with the pattern of the rest of the book, she steps back from the radical implications of her claims.

Pitkin contends that it is a mistake to assimilate political representation to private representation because, first, it is not a one-to-one but a one-to-many relationship. A “political representative—at least the typical member of an elected legislature—has a constituency rather than a single principal” (214). He or she acts for an “unorganized group” that would not have a “single interest” even if its members—“most of whom seem incapable of forming an explicit will on political questions”—could manage to formulate one (214, 221). It follows that political representation is intrinsically and inevitably transformative. Unlike private representation, it creates for a dispersed and diffuse constituency an interest or principle that did not pre-exist the act of representation, thereby drawing them together in a way that they would not be *without* the act of representation. Political representation is unlike private representation in that it cannot be conceived as some kind of approximation of or correspondence to a person or a collective body that is given in advance of the process of representation itself.

Second, following upon the “equivalence” aspect of representation, she maintains that a conception of political representation must attribute a capacity for action and judgment to both the principal and the agent. The argument she offers in defense of this point does not simply reiterate her review of the analogies to representation as acting for. Instead, she puts forward a potentially radical break with foundationalism. Why must the representative have agency? Because the will and interests of the constituency do not exist independently of the act of representation. Consequently, “the representative must act independently; his action must involve discretion and judgment; he must be the one who acts” (209). Yet this is not the agency of a specialist or guardian because political questions are not reducible to matters of fact or expertise. We need representation “only where interest is involved,” that is, neither where decisions are “merely arbitrary choices,” nor where we are “content to leave matters to the expert” (212). It follows that a constituency (or a faction of it) may object to what the representative does in their name. There is a “potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done” that can not be neatly resolved in political representation as it can be in the forms of private representation (209). Whereas a patient who refuses a medical treatment or a client who resists professional advice that really is in his or her interests might be declared incompetent, in political representation, the “represented must...be (conceived as) capable of independent action, not merely being taken care of” (209). Conflict, then, is a potential in political representation but the representative must act in such a way that it does “not normally take place..., or if it occurs, an explanation is called for” (209).

Third, this potential for conflict means that political representation is principally an activity, a “substantive acting for others” that involves “resolving the conflicting claims of the parts, on the basis of their common interest in the welfare of the whole” (217). For Pitkin, then, political representation cannot appeal to an objective basis for determining the common interest. A concept of political

representation must take the irreducibility of political conflict into account. Pitkin's insistence on conflict advances the debate well beyond the tiresome question whether a representative should be more like a delegate or more like a trustee. The conflict at stake in her view is not principally that between what constituents want and what they *should* want. It is, instead, the tragic conflict that exists wherever competing claims of justice are at stake. If political representation is an activity for resolving such conflicts, then Pitkin asserts that the role of the political representative must be to "pursue his constituents' interest, in a manner at least potentially responsive to their wishes," adding that "conflict between them [the representative and the constituents] must be justifiable in terms of that interest" (1967, 213).

Yet what can this mean—"justifiable in terms of that interest"—if, as Pitkin herself observes, "there can be lifelong, profound disagreement among men as to what their interest is—disagreement that remains despite deliberation and justification and argument?" (213). The answer is that these terms become internal to politics. As she puts it, "the harmony of final-objective-interests must be *created* (1967, 218; italics in original). Or, in an even more suggestive formulation that uses (and reframes) the perennial opposition between the universal and the particular as an example, "the national unity that gives localities an interest in the welfare of the whole is *not merely presupposed by* representation; it is also continually *re-created* by the representatives' activities" (218; italics added). This is a remarkable statement because it denies to such notions as the "public interest" and the "people" status as an independent standard to which acts of representation can be held accountable.

Taking Pitkin at her word that a constituency is no prior unity but an "unorganized" body that may altogether lack a "will to which [a legislator] could be responsive, or an opinion before which...to justify what he has done," her argument effects a profound reorientation of the referential structure of commonplace conception of representation: she suggests that political representation *produces* the terms on which it is to be judged. It follows that the common interest can not refer to what a group wants (or should want). Instead, it becomes more like a proposition or call that solicits support from an array of constituents that it aims to link to one another despite the fact that they may have good reasons to regard themselves as competitors rather than comrades. To characterize Pitkin's argument by a vocabulary that she does not use, this reorientation casts representation as an activity of articulation: it does not refer to a prior unity but proposes ideals for the purpose of calling out constituencies and linking them together.

In this activity, the agent-principal axis is neither the only nor even necessarily the primary determining factor of the common interest. Pitkin observes that a political representative is more than the agent of a constituency. He or she "is a professional politician in a framework of political institutions, a member of a political party who wants to get reelected, and a member of a legislature along with other representatives" (220). He or she must take into account multiple and competing factors: bargains with his or her colleagues in the legislature; the agenda and interests of the party; the ideals of the nation as a whole; not to mention his or her own "views and opinions" (220). All this

operates in addition to the diffuse and conflicting interests of the plurality that is his or her constituency. In short, “in legislative behavior a great complexity and plurality of determinants are at work, any number of which may enter into a legislative decision” (220).

It follows from this that political representation is impersonal and institutional. She writes: “when we call a governmental body or system ‘representative,’ we are saying something broader and more general about the way in which it operates as an institutionalized arrangement” (221). It is not an interpersonal and communicative relationship between a principal and an agent but a “public, institutionalized arrangement” where representation emerges not from “any single action by any one participant, but [from] the over-all structure and functioning of the system” (222-23). Political representation occurs when the system manages to “look after the public interest and be responsive to public opinion, except insofar as non-responsiveness can be justified in terms of the public interest” (224). It is, above all, a “public and institutional” process where—contrary to its normal interpersonal connotations—“responsiveness” can occur quite apart from any communicative interaction between individuals whose decisions (whether they be acts of legislation or votes) are “conscious and deliberate” (1967, 224). Provided competitive elections, a free press, separation of power and other such function, Pitkin maintains that responsiveness “may emerge from a political system in which many individuals, both voters and legislators, are pursuing quite other goals” (1967, 224).

This is the “decentering” of representation that had a potential for a radical impact. This impact was blunted by the fact that scholars seized on “responsiveness” out of the context of Pitkin’s larger argument. But also because Pitkin herself stepped back from pursuing the most radical implications of her arguments. She beats a retreat in the concluding pages of her book where she places great emphasis on “responsiveness” as defining the activity of representation. Pitkin writes:

...political representation is, in fact, representation, particularly in the sense of ‘acting for,’ and that this must be understood at the public level. The representative system must look after the public interest and be responsive to public opinion, *except insofar as non-responsiveness can be justified in terms of the public interest*. At both ends, the process is public and institutional. The individual legislator does not act alone, but as a member of a representative body. Hence his pursuit of the public interest and response to public opinion need not always be conscious and deliberate, any more than the individual voter’s role. Representation may emerge from a political system in which many individuals, both voters and legislators, are pursuing quite other goals (1967, 224; italics added).

Pitkin’s insight that political representation, in contrast to the principal-agent model, is not an intersubjective, “one-to-one, person-to-person relationship” but, rather, a “public institutionalized arrangement” remains intact here (1967, 221). But the emphasis on responsiveness has displaced her earlier emphasis on the irreducibility of conflict.

As Pitkin elaborates this notion of responsiveness, she draws herself back into a commonplace understanding of representation as referential. She begins by qualifying her earlier insistence that

representation is an activity, stating that “there need not be a constant activity of responding but there must be a constant condition of *responsiveness*, of potential readiness to respond. Next, she forecloses the possibility that representation is productive by defining “representative government [as] one which is responsive to popular wishes when there are some... We can conceive of the people as ‘acting through’ the government even if most of the time they are unaware of what it is doing, so long as we feel that they could initiate action if they so desired” 1967, 233). Here “the people” return as the active principle in representative government, in a flagrant disregard of Pitkin’s earlier characterization of “constituency” as lacking will and intention. Finally, she falls back into Edmund Burke’s tiresome opposition between delegates and trustees by taking pains to assure her readers that such a conception of representation leaves room for independence on the part of the representative:

it is perfectly compatible with leadership and with action to meet new or emergency situations. It is incompatible, on the other hand, with manipulation or coercion of the public. To be sure, the line between leadership and manipulation is a tenuous one, and may be difficult to draw. But there undoubtedly is a difference, and this difference makes leadership compatible with representation while manipulation is not (1967 232-33; all italics in the original).

Pitkin’s readers inherit an apparently urgent problem of politics: how to secure the “tenuous” line between leadership and manipulation. As a citizen of a democratic nation governed by an appointed president who has deflected my tax dollars into a trumped-up war, I will not deny feeling a certain urgency about this problem. Yet as a critical theorist, I am suspicious. The wish to secure representative government by a finding the epistemological grounds for categorical distinction between leadership and manipulation strikes me as self-defeating.

It is also dangerous, especially in the United States with its peculiar amalgam of republican, liberal, and populist political institutions and vocabularies. In such a context, “re-presentation” fuels an impulse to imagine that acts of representative government would serve democracy so long as they amount to a more or less adequate rendering of an *ambiguous* original: what the public *does* want or *should* want. This ambiguity between popular will and the public interest introduces a difference and a distance between citizens and their representatives that “responsiveness” cannot regulate. The trouble is that once we acknowledge that citizens do not always know what is in the public interest, we must also concede that “a government may be representative even if it is not responsive to the expressed wishes of the people, and conversely, it can be unrepresentative even if it follows the signaled preferences” (Przeworski et al, 11). The question of representative democracy will turn on the following: how to tell the difference between responsiveness-as-discretion and responsiveness-as-dominance. Notice that this question is framed in terms of a referential understanding of representation: it defines political representation as adequacy to goals and principles that are somehow

given prior to politics. Notice also that so long as we accept that framing, this question is impossible to answer.

In the face of discretion, the literature on representative democracy becomes a literature of lament, one whose debates typically end with a sigh, a promise, or even a snort. This sigh from Przeworski, et al: “Although democracy may not assure representation, it is still plausible that democracy is more conducive to representation than alternative regimes.” This promise from Pitkin: “The concept of representation is thus a continuing tension between ideal and achievement [that]...should present a continuing but not hopeless challenge: to construct institutions and train individuals in such a way that they engage in the pursuit of the public interest, the genuine representation of the public; and, at the same time, to remain critical of those institutions and that training, so that they are always open to further interpretation and reform” (240). And this snort from John Dunn: “The idea of well-calibrated instrumental sanctions has had a very good run for its money in modern political thinking and has an evident role in prudent institutional design. But in epistemic terms it is an astonishingly optimistic way of envisaging political relations” (7).

Is responsiveness “astonishingly optimistic” as Dunn contends? Or is it merely set up to fail, premised as it is on an “etymological” notion of representation? What should representative democracy be if not “responsive”? Perhaps “representative democracy” should be nothing at all. I do not mean that we should abolish representative government for purer, more immediate forms of self-governance. I propose, instead, to give up the effort to judge representative government and democratic government by a single comprehensive norm. I propose to consider what it might mean from normative perspective to treat the two as distinct.

A recent work by Bernard Manin has helped to clarify for me how political representation differs from both re-presentation (i.e. representation understood referentially) and from popular democracy. Manin argues that “popular self-government” and “absolute representation” *share* an impulse to abolish “the gap between those who govern and those who are governed, the former because it turns the governed into governors, the latter because it substitutes representatives for those who are represented” (174-75). Representative government is distinct both from democracy and from representation so conceived because it aims to “preserve that gap” (175).

If Manin is correct, then there is a problem whenever we United States citizens cite that gap as producing a crisis for “representative democracy.” Whenever we conceive of responsiveness as ideally reducing—if not fully closing—the gap between representatives and those they govern, *we are asking representative government to be something that it is not*. It is simply mistaken to believe that we can reduce that distance (because it is endemic to representative government), and disastrous to imagine that we will have reached our closest possible approximation of democracy once we have done so (because it would leave no room for dissent).

I find inspiration for a norm of representative government that respects the gap in a sentence written by John Dunn. Dunn declares: “as democrats, we must favor illumination, clarification, seeing



as sharply as possible just what has been done by those who *rule us in our own name*" (Przeworski et al, page # missing!!; italics added). I see in this a conception of representation that is striking for its elegance: representation is *ruling us in our own name*. Representation is ruling, a hierarchal power relation. It is ruling "us," a collectivity that recognizes itself as such, that imagines itself as somehow distinct. It is ruling us in "our own name." What a peculiar locution--our *own* name. Not our given name but our *own* name, in other words, a name that is not simply ascribed or imputed to us but one with which we identify, to which we may or may not respond. Dunn implies that though representation is hierarchal (representatives are empowered to take actions that will be binding on citizens) it is not unilateral; citizens invest in those whom they take to represent them, and in the projects that their representatives prescribe for government.

Finally, what is perhaps most interesting about Dunn's formulation is that he does not fall into the familiar locution of ruling us "on our behalf" or "in our best interests." He states, simply, that representation is ruling us in our "name." Whether he intends it to or not, this opens the possibility of breaking with a referential understanding of representation and for closing the loophole of discretion.

Between a name and a thing there is no illusion of essential or necessary connection. Names signify not by virtue of their likeness to whatever they name, but in relations (of opposition, similarity, association, etc) to other names. To conceive of political representation as ruling *by naming* would be to effect a significant shift in the current discourse of representative democracy by taking away the appeal to a referent. It would no longer make sense for political representatives to invite citizens to judge the adequacy of their terms in office according to how well or badly their acts corresponded to either the stated preferences or best interests of their constituents. On the contrary, if we were to acknowledge, as a non-referential notion of representation would urge us to do (and as Pitkin comes so close to doing) that political representation *creates* the terms on which it is judged, we could do away with the (apparent) choice between preferences and interests altogether.

This would effect a corresponding shift in the ways we would analyze political representation. Rather than compare the opinions and votes of legislators to those of their constituents or to public opinion more generally, we would look instead at the processes of naming. How do names come to be? Why do some take hold more powerfully than others? How do names play into cleavages in the electorate, effecting what E. E. Schattschneider called the "mobilization of bias" by activating some groups and discouraging others?

To conceive of political representation as ruling by naming would also eliminate the loophole of discretion. For whereas elected officials may be able to plausibly claim that they have a better vantage point on the public interest than we do, they cannot claim to know our name better than we do. But this point brings us back to the question of democracy, because it raises the question of how a constituency demonstrates either support or resistance to the process of representation.

How to define democracy without taking representation into account? Possibly it should revert to the simplest definition possible: "rule of the many." This definition makes democracy--like political

representation—a form of rule. As such, it does not complement representative government but *competes* with it. It also strips the moral overtones that accrue to democracy from such concepts as the “public interest”. The “many” is neither a public, nor even a majority. It is merely the greatest number that could be mobilized to take a position on a particular issue. This is a mobilized “many” not a spontaneous emergence: its existence and longevity are an effect of institutions that either encourage or block political organizing. A democracy that lived up to such a norm would institutionalize a rich array of modes of organizing. It would be judged *not* by its fidelity to a referent (the public interest) but by something like “foment”: the variety, vitality, and creativity of modes of activity it entertains.

I imagine a democracy in which representative government and democratic government each functioned on their own terms as a polity where political organizing could exert a check on political representatives. In such a system, representative government would be explicitly hierarchical. It would be a mode of ruling—but without recourse either to the epistemic privilege accorded by the “public interest” or to the fiction that responsiveness to the public interest closes the gap between rulers and ruled.